KYUSAKU YUMENO

夢野久作

The Spirit Drum

Translated by J.D. Wisgo

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Translated from the Japanese story “あやかしの鼓” by Kyusaku Yumeno (夢野久作), as listed on Aozora Bunko.

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Translator’s Introduction

Kyusaku Yumeno, originally Yasumichi Sugiyama, was a Japanese author born in 1889 who wrote in a variety of genres: surreal, SF, horror, mystery, poetry, essays, and even children’s stories. He was most well known for *Dogra Magra*, an epic novel about a man who wakes up in an insane asylum one day with no memory, a work that was strongly influenced by Freud’s research into psychoanalysis. Unfortunately, this book has not yet been translated into English, nor have the majority of Kyusaku’s other works.

While I’ll admit having an interest in translating Dogra Magra, for several reasons (including its length) I decided to not attempt it yet. After doing a survey of Yumeno’s works I came across the novella “The Spirit Drum” (sometimes referred to as “Apparitional Hand Drum” or “The Eerie Hand Drum”), his first story that earned him significant popularity after being published in the literary magazine *Shinseinen* in 1926. I was drawn to this work on several levels—its unique storytelling, its connection to the ancient art form of Noh, and its vivid depiction of early 20th century Japan. But above all, I was attracted by its mysterious, surreal atmosphere, a good fit for an author whose pen name means “the eccentric dreamer”.

To fully appreciate this story requires a little background knowledge about Noh theater, so I’ve prepared a brief summary of it following this. (For those eager to start the story, however, feel free to skip that section now; you can circle back around later if you like.)

I sincerely hope you enjoy the dark and mysterious world Kyusaku Yumeno presents us in “The Spirit Drum”.

— J. D. Wisgo

A Brief Introduction to Noh Theater

Noh, written using the character 能 (meaning “ability”), is a style of classical Japanese theater that combines elements of drama, dance, and music. What is considered Noh theater today was established around 600 years ago in the 14th century, although some of its fundamental elements are over 1000 years old. Noh is sometimes compared to the works of Shakespeare, but it should be noted that Shakespeare was active nearly 200 years later, in the late 16th century. Noh is said to be the oldest major form of theater that is still performed frequently in modern times.

Though now regarded as a form of entertainment, Noh plays were originally performed at religious ceremonies and have evolved from various art forms including India ink painting, Zen Buddhism, and ancient dances that served as dedications to the gods. Noh is heavily story-driven and often focuses on dramatic plots of obsession, vengeance, or romance. Despite the religious origins of Noh, only a relatively small fraction of Noh works contain a god as a character.

Music is an integral part of Noh theater, with performances usually employing an ensemble cast of four instruments: flute (*fue*), stick drum (*taiko*), hip drum (*ōtsuzumi*), and hand drum or shoulder drum (*kotsuzumi*).

The actors and musicians wear ornate uniforms, but the stage itself is relatively simple, the actors’ movements are often slow, and the lines are spoken in a monotone voice that can be difficult to understand by everyday people. Some characters wear masks, called *nohmen*, which are usually expressionless and hide the actors’ facial expressions. Perhaps because of these characteristics, Noh can be seen as difficult to understand and has a high barrier to entry. However, it is said that the power of Noh comes from this simplicity, which allows the audience to use their imagination to fill in the details. Noh theater is considered as an important Japanese

cultural tradition, and in 2008 was declared by UNESCO as a masterpiece of intangible heritage of humanity.

The internet contains many resources about Noh theater, and http://www.the-noh.com/ is one excellent site with rich content, including PDF files that summarize a selection of Noh plays in modern English and Japanese. While you can find Noh plays on places like YouTube, this unique performance art must be experienced in person to truly appreciate its atmosphere. In addition to those performed in Japan, you can find other Noh theater performances throughout the world.

Okina (翁), a word that means “old man”, is the name of an ancient piece that is thought to be older than Noh itself, and unlike typical Noh works it is not story-based. Instead, it is composed of a series of sacred rites with a unique mysterious atmosphere. The lines are written in a classical form of Japanese, and several of the key phrases, such as the repeated “To-totarari” are not well understood to this day.

Kyusaku Yumeno, the author of “The Spirit Drum”, was heavily involved in Noh theater from a young age, and has written passionately about this traditional art. In his essay *Nohgirai* (“Noh-dislike”) he addresses public criticism of Noh theater by stating that the popularity of other art forms over Noh is actually due to their lower artistic value, resulting in better accessibility to the public, whereas on the other hand 99% of society dislikes or does not understand Noh theater. Yumeno himself admitted it was difficult to describe what attracted him to Noh, but said that when people actually try to learn about Noh themselves they often become great enthusiasts, even those that previously had a strong objection.

The Spirit Drum

I’m delighted. At last, the time has come when I can speak about the origin of *Ayakashi No Tsuzumi*, “The Spirit Drum”.

It is said that the name “ayakashi” was taken from a distortion of the word “akagashi”, meaning “red oak” and referring to the fact that the drum’s barrel was made from a red oak tree with an intricate wood grain as opposed to the usual sakura or azalea tree. But the name is also a nod to the fact that the word “ayakashi” is used in traditional Noh theater to mean “ghost”.

This drum is indeed the ghost of drums. Even though both the drum’s head and barrel appear to be quite new, it is rumored that the drum was actually made one hundred years ago, and if you try to place it upon your shoulder and play it, instead of the bright sound of a typical drum you’ll hear a dull, gloomy *thuh*.

Judging from what I know, this drum’s sound has cursed the lives of at least six or seven people. Furthermore, four of them were born in the Taisho era [1912-1926]. Each person’s death was hastened by the sound of this drum.

But in the modern age, surely it is difficult to believe in such a story. During a recent investigation into the unusual deaths of three of these cursed individuals, it was only natural for me, Kyuya Otomaru, to be identified as the culprit. After all, I’m the only surviving one of the group…

I have a request. I don’t care who, but after I die I’d like someone to let the world know about this final note of mine. You will probably be laughed at by those learned in modern teachings. But still…

I am certain that anyone who understands how tightly the sound of a musical instrument can seize the human heart will believe what I have to say.

As I think about this, I am overcome with emotion.

In Kyoto, one hundred years ago, there was a man named Kuno Otomaru.

The illegitimate child of a certain woman of high standing, by nature he loved playing with hand drums and from an early age enjoyed ordering various skins at the leather shop and hunting for different types of wood at the lumber dealer, which he used to make hand drums. This invoked displeasure from his parents, and scorn from society, but he paid no mind to any of it. Later, after taking a wife from a merchant family, he finally turned drum-making into a proper occupation and began to attend to the needs of wealthy customers, changing his last name to Otomaru, a suitable name for a drum maker [which derives from the words for “sound” and “round”].

One of Kuno’s customers was the noble family Imaoji, whose beautiful daughter Ayahime was proficient in the hand drum. Owing to her mischievous nature, this noblewoman was rumored to have been involved with an assortment of men, and at that time already had several illegitimate children. However, despite possessing a wife and a child of his own, after developing a fondness for this daughter one day he began to make approaches to her in secret under the pretense of selling hand drums.

Ayahime responded favorably to Kuno’s advances. Yet it seemed to be merely a short-lived diversion to her, and she soon became engaged to a certain Kyou Tsuruhara from a similarly high-class family, who was also said to be proficient in the hand drum.

Upon hearing this, Kuno spoke not a word. But at the wedding, Kuno presented Ayahime with a hand drum he had made himself, asking her to kindly receive his gift.

This was the item that would later become known as “The Spirit Drum”.

It was also then that certain unfortunate incidents began to occur in the Tsuruhara family.

After getting married into the Tsuruhara family, Ayahime brought out the hand drum and began to play it, but everyone was surprised by the unusual tone it produced—a terribly dismal, yet softly beautiful sound.

Later, Ayahime developed the odd tendency to shut herself in her room and play this hand drum, all day and all night. Then one

day she took her own life without reason and departed this world. Shortly after, Kyou Tsuruhara's health declined—though unclear if caused by anguish over his loss—and several years later, on the way home after an envoy mission to the Kanto region, he vomited blood and passed away in the city of Hamamatsu. Perhaps his illness was what they now call tuberculosis, or something similar. He was said to have been succeeded by his younger brother.

But even Kuno, the creator of the drum, did not end up unscathed. Deeply regretting his gift of the drum, one day Kuno snuck into the Tsuruhara residence with the intention to steal it back, but he was regrettably discovered by a young samurai by the name of Sakon being employed at the time, and his shoulder was sliced by the samurai's blade. Kuno breathed his last breath shortly after escaping and arriving home. These were the words spoken in his final moments:

"Into that drum I have channeled my feelings of utter emptiness after being forsaken by that woman. That's why its tone differs considerably from a normal drum created to make a cheerful sound. It was my intention to make others play this drum and sympathize with my lifeless existence. But I never bore even an inkling of resentment. As proof, look at the drum's barrel; it is made with an ancient red oak with an intricately-patterned wood grain from the so-called "precious tree", which in all Japan yields only to my chisel. Moreover, I have adorned the hand drum with a gold lacquer containing auspicious symbols. Because even the court nobles were impoverished, I prayed that at least the family she had married into would fare well. I never imagined, even in my wildest dreams, that such a terrible thing would happen. Anyone will do—but please, someone must honor these last words of mine and recover that hand drum. Then smash it to pieces so it will never cause harm again. Please, I beg this of you."

This was Kuno's last request, but no one ever went to recover the hand drum from the Tsuruhara family. On the contrary, because of Kuno Tsuruhara's unusual death, the body was buried in strict secrecy.

But rumors of his last request soon spread far and wide, and sure enough, even the Tsuruhara family caught wind of it. The Tsuruhara family kept the hand drum in a custom-made box and stored it in a thickly walled storeroom, careful to leave it untouched even when cleaning. At the same time, the instrument somehow earned the nickname “The Spirit Drum”, and unusual things began to happen even though the box had remained closed…but in exchange, the family that possessed this drum became wealthy—or so the legend went. While unclear if caused by the drum, for no specific reason the condition of the Tsuruhara family gradually began to improve, and after the Meiji restoration the head of the family was even given the honorable rank of viscount. At the start of the Taisho era they left Kyoto and constructed an extensive residence in Higashinakano.

On the other hand, Ayahime’s family Imaoji was not nearly as fortunate. After Ayahime married into the Tsuruhara family her lineage was on the verge of becoming extinct, but a search began for one of her illegitimate children while keeping up appearances to the public, and in the end it seems a proper heir was finally established. Nevertheless, afterward the family gradually fell into ruin, and no one seems to know what happened to them after the Meiji restoration.

In this way, two families were affected by The Spirit Drum—one rising to prosperity, one falling to decay—while Kuno Otomaru was succeeded by his son Kyuhaku and his grandson Kyui, who managed to make a living by playing the hand drum. However, neither of them took Kuno’s last request seriously and attempted to recover The Spirit Drum from the Tsuruhara family.

Kuno’s grandfather, Kyui, is my father.

My father worked doing jobs like a hand drum repairman and dealer since the time he lived in Kyoto. However, despite being apparently proficient in such handiwork he had difficulty attracting customers, and had lost contact with his firstborn son Kyuroku after sending him to live in another household at the age of six. But a hand drum master living in the Kudan region of Tokyo, Yakuro Hayabayashi, was unable to bear seeing this and summoned the son to Tokyo where he rented a small house for him near

Tsukudohachiman, Ushigome. With this, his father finally obtained peace of mind.

But in 1904, after my mother died while giving birth to me, for some reason my father began to grow indolent, spending most of his time reading borrowed books. Then, in the summer of 1915, he was afflicted with spinal disease and, after I cared for him for nearly three years, passed away from pneumonia in the fall of 1917. At that time he was 55.

But something happened shortly before his death.

After looking it over I started reading *Kinsesetsu Bishonenroku* out loud to my father, a mystery novel I had borrowed from an old master in Kudan. But my father immediately interrupted me, speaking in fragmented sentences.

“Hold on, son. Today I’ll tell you an interesting story.” He began speaking about the origin of The Spirit Drum. It was the very first time I had heard of such a thing.

“However…” continued my father after taking a sip of water.

“…to tell you the truth, like the others I never took this story seriously. Such convoluted tales are common with famous craftsmen…so even when I visited Tokyo I never searched for where the Tsuruhara family was, nor did I pay any mind to it.

“Three years ago in the spring, one day when I was out sweeping the facade a young, beautiful 20-year-old woman by the name of Haikara stopped by and asked me to adjust her drum, showing me a hand drum with a pretty-looking head and barrel. When I casually took the item from her I was shocked—the barrel was decorated with auspicious symbols and the wood an attractive red oak. I knew it must be The Spirit Drum that I had heard about. This is how Haikara introduced herself:

“ ‘I am from the Tsuruhara family of Nakano and desire to study under Mr. Hayabashi of Kudan. I found this hand drum at home and attempted to play it, but no matter what I try I am unable to produce a good sound. Tradition says this is a drum of superb quality, hence I feel it should produce a proper sound.’

“ ‘Oh really, What sort of tradition would that be…’ I tried asking, already knowing the answer myself. But it seemed she was

not very knowledgeable, perhaps because she was only recently married into the Tsuruhara family.

“But when she said a word that sounded a little like the drum’s name, I knew this was in fact The Spirit Drum.

“I decided to take possession of the drum for the time being and send the pretty woman home. Then I placed the drum on my shoulder and tried playing it…when a terrible shiver ran through me. This was no ordinary hand drum. My grandfather Kuno’s final words had been genuine. I realized that the Tsuruhara family curse was real.

“Having said that, there was no way that the Tsuruhara family was going to sell me the drum, and no matter how much I thought about it I wasn’t able to come up with a way to take ownership of the drum. Thus, the next day I took the drum to the Tsuruhara family residence in Nakano and met with the wife, telling her a lie.

“ ‘This hand drum does not seem to be of any use to you. To begin with, because it has been stored away for a long time without being played the drum head has gone bad. Even the barrel, while seemingly very well-built, was made from oak and therefore will not reverberate well. I believe this item was most likely used long ago as an ornamental prop for marriage ceremonies…as evidenced by the minimal wear…and the presence of many auspicious symbols…’

“This was the most difficult part of my business; such deception was utterly inappropriate, except for when I was forced to dishonor myself for the sake of another. But the young wife nodded as if satisfied by my explanation.

“ ‘I too considered that the drum might be at fault. But then I thought that it might be my lack of talent, so I’m relieved to hear you say that. Well then, I’ll carefully store this away somewhere,’ she said with a smile.

“The wife pressed a ten-yen bill into my hand. Shortly after that my spinal problems began and I was no longer able to work, and the wife, being busy with other work, never came back to see me.

“But I just couldn’t get it out of my mind. So whenever I happened to visit Kudan I would gather information about the Tsuruhara family from the apprentices there…and then, what do you know…

“Rumor had it that the Viscount Tsuruhara was, by nature, a fastidious man who was proud of his lineage, to the extent that he found it difficult to find a wife and remained single until the age of thirty. But on a trip to Osaka to take care of a bit of business near the end of the previous year, he was hit by a so-called bolt of the blue. It is not clear where they first met, but it seems he fell deeply in love with the woman who would later become his current wife, and eventually made her part of the viscount family. But unfortunately his wife’s ancestry could not be determined, so each and every one of his relatives severed ties with him. No longer able to remain in Kyoto, he went to live in Nakano, Tokyo.

“But, in any case, shortly after the wife (I remember her name being something like ‘Tsuruko’) moved to Tokyo and began to learn the hand drum, one day when the viscount was absent the maid in attendance, face pale, took out The Spirit Drum and began playing it, ignoring all requests to stop. Some later time it seems the viscount scolded her severely after hearing of this, and—perhaps disturbed by what happened—the viscount was plagued by convulsions and confined to a small cell-like room. Following that Tsuruko sold off their Nakano residence and built a small house doubling as a convalescent home in Kougai city, Azabu, where she lived with her husband. But as she cared for him while taking lessons from a young master, her husband grew thin as a thread and passed away this spring.

“Then Lady Tsuruhara, now a widow, brought in nephews and various others in an attempt to create a successor, but her relatives were all angered by this and clamored to the nobility to revoke her status. To make matters worse, many unpleasant rumors were spread about the young widow Tsuruko herself…either way, the Tsuruhara family’s succession was essentially cut short.

“I am not going to tell anyone, but I think all of that happened because of The Spirit Drum. And so, recently I’ve made up my mind. Being my son, you’ve learned the basics of the hand drum long ago. In time, I think you’ll figure out how to properly play it.

“But I have something important to tell you. No matter what happens, you must never try to play a hand drum. I’m not being superstitious here. If you try to play one, you’ll naturally desire a

better instrument. I'm telling you this because, in the end, you'll surely be tempted by *that* drum. Because The Spirit Drum embodies all the secrets of drum-making.

"And when that happens, your days will be numbered. There isn't a single person who has heard the voice of that drum and not been touched in some way. You'll either lose your mind or be changed irrevocably.

"You must study hard, become a merchant or government official, and go someplace far from Tokyo. Also make sure you stay away from the Tsuruhara family.

"I've been obsessively worrying over this lately. I eventually plan to make this same request to the old master, but if you don't heed my warning that won't matter.

"Now son…don't you ever forget…"

Listening to my father talking was like listening to the telling of a fairy tale. But I didn't have any particular interest in learning to play the hand drum, so I just nodded quietly.

This appeared to put my father at ease.

In the autumn of that year, my father passed away and I was taken in by the old master in Kudan. Before long I continued my schooling at Fujimi Elementary School, all cheerful and pudgy. I never had another thought about The Spirit Drum.

The old master was short, well-tanned, and had dark eyes that sparkled. At the time he had just turned 61 years old and was planning a special celebration that spring for this auspicious occasion, but his adopted son had unexpectedly run away from home and in the ensuing confusion the festivities got canceled.

The young master's name was Seijiro. I had never met him before, but Seijiro, unlike his father, was a portly, kind man who produced an excellent tone on the hand drum, to the extent that first-class geisha would come from all over when Seijiro had a performance someplace like Tokyo or Osaka. He left home at age twenty with nothing but the clothes on his back, and without any notes left behind or anything to serve as a clue nobody had any idea where to search for him. Around that time, I heard from a talkative

maid that a certain impatient apprentice who lived with the master was secretly plotting to become his successor.

“But *you* will probably become the successor, right?” said the maid.

However, the old professor never said anything to me about becoming a hand drum player. He only showered me with affection.

But with the family being what it was, the sound of the hand drum could be heard constantly from morning to evening. When I was forced to listen to the relentless drumming to the point of utter annoyance, in spite of being a young child I soon developed an ear for the drum. Sounds that at first seemed pleasing gradually began to sound uninteresting to me. The tone of the supposedly most skilled apprentice sounded more rounded, more pretty, even more graceful than the others, but even so it never went beyond what I would call beautiful. I wondered if there could be a drum with a slightly more *noble* tone…quiet like a god…or an eerie sound like the voice of an evil spirit.

I had developed an unbearable urge to listen to the old master’s hand drum.

But the old master usually played either on stage or when teaching at a student’s house, and at home rarely even picked up his drum. Furthermore, because I was going to school, for a while after coming to live in the Hayabashi household I was unable to hear the old master’s drum even a single time. Someone said that he had played some sort of auspicious song at the first practice of the year, but unfortunately I missed it, having been serving customers at the time.

One day in early spring when I was sixteen, I returned to Kudan with a diploma from a two-year college and went immediately to the old master’s place on the roof, where I showed the certificate to him. Facing away from me, in the middle of writing something with a red pencil, he turned to me and smiled.

“Ahh, here you go,” he said, piling a bunch of candies onto a saucer for me. He watched with a grin as I nibbled on the candies, but before long withdrew an old hand drum from a drawer next to a decorative alcove and began to play.

When I heard the *tap, tap, tap, thuh, thuh, thuh* sound of his drum, I was struck by its sense of nobility and my hair stood up on end. I felt as if a benevolent mother was whispering something to me, and emotions overtook me.

“So, do you want to learn the hand drum?” the old master said to me with a grin, a single pristine white false tooth showing.

“Yes, please teach me,” I answered in an instant. And so, that day I began learning songs like “Mitsuji” and “Tsuzuke” on a cheap practice drum.

But my reputation as a hand drum player was not very good. To begin with, I couldn’t produce a nice tone. And the other apprentices always complained to me about my improper timing and breathing.

“You eat too much and it disturbs your concentration,” they would say, making fun of me. “And when you play, your cheeks get all rosy like the kitchen maid…”

But it didn’t bother me in the slightest—after all, I didn’t need to become a hand drum player. I just needed to take care of the old master until he passed away, repaying his kindness, and then I would become a monk and travel all over Japan…but because of these thoughts I ate even more to keep up my health.

Around the end of spring the following year, it was decided that the young master would be considered deceased, so a small, private memorial service was held in the old master’s room with only candies and tea.

“Perhaps you should soon adopt another…” said a gray-haired gentleman who appeared to be the old master’s father, and three or four apprentices looked towards me at once. The old master smiled.

“Hmm…After Sei (the young master) I am not expecting to find anyone else. No one is any better than the others…” he said and looked across at their faces. The apprentices all blushed.

Right then I suddenly had a great urge to see the young master; I was sure he was still alive somewhere. And I got the feeling he was still playing the hand drum. I truly wished to hear the sound of his drum…but as I daydreamed while staring at the young master’s memorial tablet, lit brightly by the light on the altar behind the old master, I was shocked when the gray-haired old man unexpectedly spoke out, butting in once again.

“What about that boy Kyuya?”

“Certainly not. You see, this boy is what you would call ‘drum-inept’…His nature forbids the production of any reasonable tone. He may very well be like this his entire life. Such a condition has been quite rare for ages, though,” the old master said as he patted my head. It was my turn to blush.

“Will that boy ever amount to anything?” came a voice from the group of apprentice boys. One of them even broke out laughing.

“When he does, he will be a true master,” said the old master, voice calm. Everyone’s mouth gaped open wide in bewilderment.

After we all came down from the roof the old master took out his special sweet bean jelly. He spoke as he smoked tobacco from a long pipe.

“I wonder why you can’t make a good tone with the drum…You should be capable of a good sound, but you ruin it by constantly adjusting the tuning paper. I wonder why you would ever do such a thing…”

I answered without hesitation.

“There is no drum that I like. They all resonate too much.”

“Indeed,” said the old master as he let out a puff of white smoke towards the dark ceiling, his mood apparently gone a tad sour.

“Then what type of sound *do* you like?”

“Every drum I play sounds like *thump, thump, thump*, and I can’t bear to hear the ‘ump’ part. I want a drum with a quiet sound that doesn’t resonate: *thuh…thuh…thuh.”*

“…Hmm…Then what about my drum?”

“I like it, but…it makes a sound like *thuhn, thuhn, thuhn*. I personally think it would be better if the ‘uhn’ sound wasn’t there.”

The old master blew out a big puff of smoke again towards the ceiling as he blinked bleary eyes.

“Master,” I said with a hint of confidence in my voice.

“I heard that there is a famous drum at the Tsuruhara residence. Might it be acceptable to borrow that?”

“Absolutely not,” he said and glared hard at me. Until then, I had never seen the old master with an expression that serious. I looked down, avoiding his gaze, and said nothing.

“Is it not said that one who uses *that* drum will cause bad luck for their family? Even assuming it is a tall tale, it is inappropriate to wish misfortune on another family. Now you listen to me. If there is no drum that you like, you’ll never step foot on stage.”

I turned dead pale—this was the first time in my life I had been this severely scolded by the old master. But deep down, I didn’t feel any remorse for what I said.

It was then that The Spirit Drum became the object of my longing.

Shortly after, the old master announced to everyone that I would be his successor. All of the apprentices called me “young master” reluctantly.

But I was disheartened by this. After everything that happened, I was going to become an honest-to-goodness hand drum player. I was doomed to a life of catering to those below my level. This thought alone was enough to upset me. I remembered with great hatred what my father had always said: “You must never turn your back on what the old master has done for you.” At the same time, I felt as if I now understood why the young master had run away from home, and my longing for him grew intolerably strong. Even so, my desire to see the young master was but a fleeting urge compared to my yearning to see The Spirit Drum.

As before, I continued to put on weight as I played my drum. *Rumpapum*, *rumpapum*.

In the spring of 1923 I turned twenty one. One afternoon in mid-March the old master summoned me. “Take this to the Tsuruhara family,” he said, passing me a square-shaped package wrapped in wrinkled cloth.

When I heard the words “Tsuruhara family”, I remembered the drum and my heart raced as I looked at the old master’s face. He stared back at me intently.

“Don’t let anyone find out. Their house is diagonally opposite from the Shinto central office in Kogai city. Enclosed by fir trees, there’s no nameplate or anything else to identify it by,” he said, blinking.

Carrying the candy-like package, I passed through the Hayabashi residence's crossbarred gate wearing a hunting cap, a white and indigo blue patterned cloth, a hakama made from kokura fabric, a black long cloak, thick tabi socks, and geta clogs made from magnolia wood.

Below the cloudy sky the sakura trees around the Shinto central office in Kogai city blossomed a pure white. A short distance away was a gloomy single-story building surrounded by a grove of fir trees. There was no nameplate visible on the tall cement wall or the cypress-built entrance, nor was there anything written on the round, polished-glass lamps below the eaves. This is the place, I thought as I crossed the bridge spanning the moat, a single plank of wood.

The moment I opened the latticed door in the entrance, an inner door made of shoji paper slid open and an emaciated student, a year or two my senior, wearing dark blue and white peeked his head out and made a polite bow, three fingers from each hand touching the floor. He wore black-rimmed glasses, hair parted neatly down the middle of his head.

"Might this be the Tsuruhara family…I am from the Hayabayashi family of Kudan and…I brought this from the old master…" I said as I passed him the candy box, still wrapped.

The student accepted the package and glanced at my face for a moment, then untied it right there, revealing a cedar box wrapped in high-quality paper, tied with black strings. Upon it was a scrap of paper with writing in blocky letters: "Myoin Temple, Seian Takayo… 7th year of death".

Oh my, I thought. I had carried the package all the way here without realizing it had actually contained a special tea commemorating the young master's 7th death anniversary. His memorial service had been held in a small private group such that none of the amateur students were informed, so why would the old master do something like this? As I watched, thinking that perhaps Lady Tsuruhara had gone out of her way to give a monetary offering, the student picked up the slip of paper, reading and rereading it as his face went pale. There was something odd about his reaction.

Eventually the student flashed an odd grin at me and said, "Thank you for coming all the way here…Would you mind coming in

for a little while? I'm all by myself, but…"

His voice was extremely soft, possessing the charm of a young woman. I considered my options. Some part of me felt that I should not go in, but at the same time I felt an unbearable urge to enter. But as I was standing there indecisively the student, holding the box, hesitantly spoke again.

"…There shouldn't be any problem…besides…I have a little favor to…ask of you."

I made up my mind and took off my shoes. The student led me into a small closet-less room on the side of the entrance, which seemed to once have been a reception room. Inside was a space roughly one hundred square feet cluttered with various newspapers, novels, and magazines mixed in with wicker boxes and other odds and ends, and in the center was a large porcelain brazier with an iron kettle, around which was only barely enough space to sit down. The student pushed aside a jumble of tea utensils, then handed me a cushion from the corner of the room.

"I'm Tsumaki, Lady Tsuruhara's nephew," he greeted me.

So that's who this guy is, I thought to myself as I lowered my head in respect again, when Tsumaki—acting at odds with his kind demeanor—abruptly picked up the cedar box and pulled the string taut until it snapped. As I stared in surprise he opened the lid, took out a Fugetsu bean-jam wafer, popped into his mouth, and then quickly offered one to me.

"Would you like one?"

I was a bit startled by this. But when I realized his lips were white and swollen like tofu, I finally understood. Addicted to sweets, Tsumaki was doing this sort of thing constantly. And as a result, he was destroying his stomach. It seems he had invited me in to make me an accomplice to this practice. Now, having understood his intentions, I suddenly felt a sense of familiarity with the young man and extended my hand to accept his offer.

However, I couldn't help being amazed again by his crude way of eating. Not only had he already finished off four or five more candies than me, but he continued to stuff them down his throat at an alarming rate, four or five for every three I ate, and before I knew it the box was already over half empty.

I finally surrendered and drank a sip of tea. Tsumaki popped two more wafers into his mouth, pulled an old newspaper from between a set of books behind him and snapped it open loudly, wrapping the remaining twenty candies inside before stuffing the paper deep behind the books. He then picked up the cedar box and crushed it with a loud *crack*, gathering the pieces together like a bundle of firewood. After wrapping the wood and the label in the special paper, he tied the string around it all.

“I’m terribly sorry, but…” Tsumaki said, holding out the bundle towards me.

“Would you mind throwing this away somewhere on your way home?”

When I accepted it with a smile, his face lit up like a small child. He spoke once more, this time with an extra touch of politeness.

“Yes, and one more thing. I’m truly sorry, but would you mind keeping this a secret from your teacher?”

I nearly broke out laughing.

“Yes, of course. I was going to ask you the same.”

“Thank you very much. I will never forget your kindness, even in death,” Tsumaki said, suddenly lowering both hands until his head touched the tatami mat.

His exaggerated, over-polite manner gave me a strange feeling again. The Viscount Tsuhara was said to have died from madness, but there was also something odd about this young man. I wondered if he was cursed by The Spirit Drum.

Yet at the same time, I had another unbearable urge to see The Spirit Drum. Moreover, I began to feel that now was perhaps the best opportunity for that.

“If I ask this young man now,” I thought, “he may very well show me the drum. Now is the perfect chance. There will never be another opportunity like this because I don’t know whether I’ll ever come back to this house again.”

But at the same time I felt horribly guilty, and so I mulled things over while starting at Tsumaki. He stared back at me intently through his dark glasses. Suddenly, as if induced by his smile, the words blurted out of my mouth.

“It is said that you have an item here called ‘The Spirit Drum’…”

Tsumaki's smile vanished in an instant. I summoned all my courage and spoke again.

"If you don't mind, could you please show that drum to me in secret?"

Without saying a word he continued staring fixedly at me, but before long he spoke, voice quieter than before.

"You must stop this. It's worthless, that drum…although I heard that because of some odd legend there are hand drum aficionados who desire it… "

"Indeed," I said, discouraged to a degree. But what does this mere student know? Just as I was thinking this, Tsumaki began speaking with a certain dramatic flair, as if to calm me down.

"Those absurd stories are all just superstitions. Because the drum's first owner was named 'Ayahime', people made up worthless legends based on the Noh chant 'The Hand Drum of Aya' and the Noh theater piece 'The Mysterious Mask'. These are completely groundless."

"I have heard differently."

"Of course you have. That drum was a prop once used as an ornament in the wedding of a certain high-ranking individual. Because it made nearly no sound people made up various rumors…"

After hearing this point I calmed down, and with a smile I interrupted Tsumaki.

"Wait…I've heard that story before. A woman in my family was deceived by a certain hand drum craftsman. That craftsman told that lie to protect my family. In reality, it was a very well-made drum…"

But before I could finish speaking I was shocked to see Tsumaki's facial expression undergo an extreme change in only a fraction of a second. The hair of his eyebrows rippled and stood on end; his mouth dangled open lifelessly, revealing a sloppy, rough tongue where bits of the wafer's bean paste still clung.

I shivered as if a bucket of water had just been splashed on my face. Something is terribly wrong here. This young man isn't of sound mind. This too is surely connected to The Spirit Drum. "I've said a terrible thing…" I thought, staring intently at his face.

But my panic only lasted the briefest of moments. As I watched, Tsumaki calmed down and his usual pale, indifferent expression

returned just as a long, trembling sigh escaped from his nose. Then he closed his eyes and mouth, crossing his arms in contemplation; soon after he opened his eyes and spoke, a certain clarity in his voice.

“All right. I will show it to you.”

“What…will you really show me?” I blurted out, involuntarily straightening my posture.

“Yes. However, today will not be possible.”

“Anytime is fine.”

“But first, I have something to ask.”

“Of course…ask anything you like.”

“Would you happen to have the family name ‘Otomaru’?”

I can’t say what expression my face had that moment. Staring at Tsumaki’s face intently enough to burn a hole in it, I just barely managed to nod. Then I spoke, my speech fragmentary.

“…How did you…know I was…”

Tsumaki nodded deeply, and answered with a dejected look.

“I guess I don’t have any choice. I’ll tell you the truth. I heard it from the young master of the family you are staying with. I had asked him to teach me how to play the hand drum, but…”

I swallowed hard. I couldn’t bear to wait for what Tsumaki was going to say.

“…My aunt asked the young master about the drum. A certain craftsman had claimed it was only a decoration that would not make a proper sound, she said, but was this really true? The young master responded that he didn’t know, but the only way to tell would be to actually play it, and he said he would try to do just that…That was seven years ago, exactly seven years ago today…So when he went home that day he tried to play the drum. After that he went off somewhere and disappeared, but I’ve never heard of him returning to Kudan.”

“Is the young master still alive?” I asked him without a second’s pause. He nodded silently. Then he spoke again, voice hushed.

“…cursed by that drum…doomed to live as a living corpse…yet terribly embarrassed…he hid himself away somewhere…so that nobody who knew him would ever find him.”

“And how do you know all of this?”

“…when I met with him…he told me this and left. But he also said he suspected a boy named Otomaru would become the successor.”

My face turned bright red, to the tips of my ears. Thinking about how the young master trusted him made me vaguely uncomfortable.

At the same time, this student standing before me named Tsumaki now seemed to be a completely different person of high esteem; he must have been a man of great ability in order for the young master to disclose these things to him.

“And then…what happened after that, sir?” I asked respectfully, feeling compelled to bow deeply to him right then and there.

I thought I saw a hint of redness on Tsumaki’s face as well, but he continued on with increased enthusiasm.

“When I heard this I was furious. The idea that a mere hand drum could make a sound that would bring ruin to someone’s life was ridiculous. A drum is something able to produce a variety of sounds based on the feelings of the performer, not something able to change the human heart by itself. I wanted to find a way to play that drum. But just as I was hoping I could use that drum to produce not a malicious sound, but an ordinary, pleasant sound, and avenge the young master, my aunt summoned me. I gladly quit my studies and came to this house.”

“…Then…did you ever play the hand drum?” I asked, my heart beating out of control. But Tsumaki only gave me a strange cold smile, and said nothing. I grew impatient and spoke again.

“What did the drum look like?”

Tsumaki’s strange smile remained for a time, but he eventually responded feebly, as if in resignation.

“I have yet to see it.”

“What…you still haven’t…” I said, shocked.

“No. My aunt is hiding it from me and refuses to show me.”

“But why?” I asked, my feelings a mix of disappointment and resentment. Tsumaki began to explain, a hint of pity in his voice.

“When my aunt heard the sound of the young master playing The Spirit Drum, she longed to make such a sound herself. After learning to make that sound she wanted to take the drum and show off to the wives, students, and friends of the Takabayashi family.

That's the reason I have not gone to the Takabayashi residence since."

"Then why is she hiding it from you?" I flung another question at him. Tsumaki responded with a bitter smile, my pressure starting to put him on the defensive.

"She surely thinks that I have come to steal the drum."

"So do you know where it is hidden?"

Tsumaki became more defensive as my questions became more direct.

"…She leaves the house every day. I've been searching all over whenever she goes out, but I just can't find it."

"Could she be taking it with her each time she leaves?"

"No, that's definitely not…"

"So does your aunt…does this lady always play that hand drum?"

His face showed a touch of embarrassment, my question apparently catching him off guard. But, as if justifying himself, he soon mumbled out an answer.

"I suffer from insomnia every night, so I've been taking sleeping pills. She prepares the pills for me and goes to bed after first making sure I'm asleep. She seems to play the drum right around that time."

"Oh really…but don't you ever wake up in the middle of the night?"

"No, never…especially because she gradually increases the dosage…but I'm looking forward to the day when the medicine loses its effectiveness. This has been going on now for nearly seven years."

Tsumaki lowered his head dejectedly.

Muttering "seven years…" repeatedly to myself I put my hand to my forehead; all the terrible oddness…mystery…weirdness that permeated this family was closing in on me, and my thoughts began to spin around and around like a pinwheel. It seemed that not only was this entire family cursed by The Spirit Drum, but even I myself was…

However, this young man's perseverance was far from ordinary. Enduring such a thing for seven years took great persistence. The cruelty of Lady Tsuruhara, who tormented a young man in order to

keep possession of the drum…the powerful charm of The Spirit Drum, made evident through her actions…Thinking how this drum was not a thing of this world made the flesh on the back of my neck creep.

Exhausting the last shred of my courage, I asked another question.

“So you have absolutely no idea where it is?”

“I don’t know where it is. If I did I would take it and escape from here,” Tsumaki said with an indifferent grin. I blushed again, embarrassed by the stupidity of my question.

“Let’s leave here. I’ll show you the inside of the house. That will probably give you some idea what kind of person she is. And seeing things from another person’s perspective may reveal where the drum is hidden.”

Tsumaki stood up. Despite being on the verge of giving up my search for the drum, I left the room filled with an inexplicable curiosity.

We walked out of the reception room, and on the left was a concrete-floored room that appeared to once house a rickshaw. Tsumaki made a right and led me into the kitchen.

The modern kitchen was equipped with electricity and gas, and the well-maintained wooden floor shined. With a practiced hand Tsumaki checked various places around the house—the cupboard in the decorative alcove, below the iron pot and behind it; the sliding doors above and below in the washroom; the charcoal sack and inside the pickling tub; inside the wall between the kitchen and bathroom; the empty closet in the maid’s room; the wooden boxes in the attic—but there was nothing unusual anywhere.

“Isn’t the maid here?” I asked.

“No…everyone has left. My aunt is always so noisy…"

“Then I assume your aunt takes care of the kitchen.”

“No, I do.”

“Oh, *you* take care of the…”

“I’m actually much more skilled at cooking than playing the drum. I even do all the scrubbing myself, as you can see…” He held

out the palms of both hands. Indeed, I hadn’t realized it until now but his hands were pretty rough.

As I was staring vacantly at his hands, Tsumaki led me out of the kitchen. Passing a Japanese-style garden on the right side, he went into a hallway with glass-paneled walls and opened the white door of the Western-style room on the left, entering the room ahead of me. I followed him inside.

At first, with the many items of fine quality I couldn’t make out the room’s purpose, but eventually I realized that it was a large dressing room. A magnificent carpet covered half of the shiny, rubber-coated floor. Except for the green-curtained window, both the inside surface of the door and the white walls were completely covered by mirrors, creating a cascade of infinite reflections of the room’s contents—western bathtub, stylish dresser with golden fittings hammered to a black wood frame, kimono rack, towel rack, glass cabinet like you might see in the dentist’s surgical room (filled with various toiletries and what looked like medicines), electric heater in the corner of the room, large bench below the far-side window, intricately patterned electric lamp shades hanging from the ceiling…

After entering the room, Tsumaki first inspected under the dresser. But instead of focusing on searching for the hand drum, I was wondering wide-eyed about why Lady Tsuruhara, already somewhat far along in years, had been putting on her makeup in a place that seemed suitable for an actress.

“There doesn’t seem to be anything unusual here either.” Tsumaki smiled and exchanged glances with me, then closed the door. Next he went past the blue door of the Western-style room and placed his hand on the paper wall of the Japanese-style room on the far end of the hallway.

“What about this room?” I stopped, pointing at the blue door.

“There’s no way it’s in that room. The entire floor is concrete, with only a single iron bed in the middle. It’s not there.” Tsumaki’s tone was somehow irritating to me.

“Interesting…" I found myself moving up close to the keyhole and peering inside.

On the other side of the keyhole was a flat, bluish-black stucco floor and an old packed-dirt wall. The way the light fell suggested that on the far left was a tiny window, creating a gloomy, forlorn atmosphere like an operating room in a poverty-stricken hospital. It was hard to believe this room was in the same house as that stylish dressing room.

“That’s the room I sleep in every night. It’s like a prison cell, don’t you think?”

I got the feeling that Tsumaki was sneering at me, but just then I spotted something strange: a short leather whip hanging on the far wall, which at first appeared to be a stain.

“That’s the room where my uncle died.”

As soon as his voice came from behind me I jerked my eye away from the keyhole. Seeing a sickly smile stretched across Tsumaki’s face, I felt my body stiffen. Naturally, I did not possess the courage to ask about the whip.

“Come into this room. I think this is where she plays the drum.”

I exhaled and entered the room—just as I realized this was the last room of the house…

As I stepped onto the fresh tatami mat inside the room at the back of the house, I felt my tense nerves calm down immediately.

Beyond the clean ten-foot-square space was a large, round window, providing a view of what appeared to be beautiful apricot trees.

Below the window rested a black painted desk with narrow legs, and a series of leaf-green cushions were arranged neatly around a frail-looking square charcoal brazier of paulownia wood. On the left was a chest made from the same wood, upon which were two bookshelves of different sizes and a large glass case enclosing a doll of a kappa water spirit wearing a pretty, long-sleeved kimono.

On the right, near the desk, was a cupboard and shelf with tea utensils, and below a spigot protruding from the wall was a bundle of rapeseed and milkvetch plants bundled in white thread. The right side of the room had a roughly three-foot-wide decorative alcove next to a shelf of the same size. In the alcove was an old painting of an exquisite Chinese woman set behind a crystal incense burner; on

the shelf was what looked like a sketchbook next to four cleanly arranged hand drum boxes. From the sliding doors above and below, to the new curtain of thick abaca cloth covering a partitioned closet on the left, to the modestly-designed silver knobs and the black-framed lamp shades of yellow silk hanging down from the middle of the ceiling—not a single item lacked elegance.

I couldn't help but let out a sigh.

"This is where my aunt stays."

Before he finished speaking Tsumaki casually opened the curtain on the left partition of the closet, shoved two pale hands inside, and began tossing items out: crepe bedding, flax sheets, a satin futon, a fancy sleeved futon of silk, stuffed pillows with stylish red tassels, a white mosquito net painted with a design in India ink…

"All right…that's enough…" I felt an odd hesitancy and tried to stop Tsumaki.

But he didn't listen. After Tsumaki put back the bedding and other items he had tossed out, he opened the curtain on the right partition of the closet and started pulling out the stacked clothing shelves.

"Stop. I believe you. I honestly believe you. If you have already searched then there's no doubt that…"

"Oh, really? Well then…next is the drawers…"

"All right…that's enough already."

"Then allow me to show you these drums, just for your reference."

As he spoke Tsumaki pulled down the hand drum boxes from the shelf next to the alcove. I took the boxes and placed them in the middle of the room.

When I looked at the four hand drums, removed from their boxes and laid out before me, something stirred in my chest—the premonition that The Spirit Drum was one of them.

As anyone would know who has spent any time learning the hand drum, the barrel and head of a drum are like a married couple, two things that were originally apart and have their own unique qualities. It is only when these qualities are combined that a certain sound is produced. So even assuming both are masterfully crafted items, if their qualities are not compatible there will be little sound

produced. Even if you stick on a tuning paper and try to adjust the drum, a completely different sound will be made. Therefore, assuming that there are four barrels and four drumheads, putting aside the matter of compatibility there is a total of sixteen different tones that can be made. Perhaps Lady Tsuruhara knows this, and normally keeps the barrel and drum head separate…

But I soon realized that this was a foolish thought. Tsumaki sat down across from me and began to speak at once.

"I tried mixing and matching these drum heads and barrels. But none of the other combinations worked particularly well. So, in the end, the original pairings were the best."

"Which is how the drums are now, correct?"

"That's right."

"Do they all play well?"

"Yes. Each is one of my aunt's prized possessions. As you can see, the barrels are designed according to the seasons—Spring Sakura, Summer Waves, Autumn Leaves, and Winter Snow—and when played during their respective seasons sound especially delightful. Try for yourself."

"But isn't your aunt going to come home soon?"

"We're safe, it's only three o-clock. She always comes home around five or six in the afternoon."

"Well then, if you'll excuse me…" I bowed and removed my coat. Tsumaki sat up straight.

Beginning with the closest drum—a scene of snowy pine trees—I tried each one in turn. Tsumaki listened without moving a muscle as each drum made a proper sound unlike when I had played in Kudan.

“Indeed, these are well-made instruments.”

Speaking only words of genuine praise, I next played the autumn drum, then the summer one, and finally picked up the sakura-patterned one, when suddenly my heart skipped a beat. The barrels of the other drums were all aged, yet this one was brand new. Could it be that the gold lacquer pattern, having been incompatible with the seasonal motif, had been painted over by a spring-themed pattern? Could the original pattern have contained auspicious symbols?

“When did you happen to obtain this drum?” I asked, not yet trying the final drum.

“Hmm. I honestly have no idea.”

“Do you mind if I take a closer look at the barrel?”

“Of course, go ahead,” replied Tsumaki, a strange rasp in his voice.

I loosened the aged, yellowed string and detached the barrel. Peering inside, I gasped.

Inside the barrel, lined with irregular marks from carving that still looked fresh—a special technique created by my ancestor Kuno—appeared a wood grain of red oak with a complex pattern strongly resembling snakeskin, which seemed to glow bright enough to burn my eyes. As if grabbing a real snake, my hands suddenly trembled and let go, dropping the barrel. It rolled down my leg and bumped into the knee of Tsumaki sitting beside me.

“Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!” Tsumaki suddenly broke out laughing. Chuckling uncontrollably he contorted his body, grasping his chest, eventually collapsing to the tatami mat where he continued laughing, twisting this way and that like a patient of hysteria.

“Ha, ha, ha, you really fell for it…” he said as the maniacal laughing returned.

My body began to tremble badly, even my jaw shook. I shivered while gazing into Tsumaki’s dark glasses, not knowing if from fear, horror, or annoyance. But once his laughing finally quieted down I curiously felt myself calming down too, as if being led by Tsumaki. All that remained was a slight tingling in my scalp.

Tsumaki wiped his tears as his laughter subsided.

“Oh, that was funny. That was just hilarious,” he chuckled again. ”I’m so sorry Mr. Otomaru…I mean Mr. Takabayashi. The truth is that I have deceived you. In fact, I was testing to see if you really knew about the legend of this drum. Because I showed you all around the house and feigned searching, you thought that I didn’t know where the drum was. You didn’t suspect that it was actually right here.”

After another brief fit of laughter he continued. “All that talk about sleeping pills was a fabrication. I actually play the drum every day with my aunt…”

My gaping mouth refused to close. Dumbfounded, I could only stare at Tsumaki's face.

"You're an insolent, yet honest chap. And you came here with full knowledge of this drum…"

"Why does that matter?" I said, suddenly feeling angry. I was thinking it was improper for him to laugh while I was taking things seriously…when Tsumaki wiped the tears from behind his glasses and sat up straight again. He apologized, this time utterly serious.

"I'm sorry, so terribly sorry. Don't get upset at me. I wasn't making fun of you. If I could, I would have made sure that you never found this drum and gave up your search, and I would try to distance you from the curse. That's why I showed you the drum before you began to suspect anything. But my plan was a horrible failure. Since you knew even about the wood grain of the barrel, there's no doubt that you came here after hearing your father's last request. You intend to take possession of this hand drum and smash it to pieces. Am I wrong?"

What a dreadfully unexpected turn of events…Suddenly, all my blood rushed to my head…and the next moment cold sweat began to trickle down my armpits, my arms and legs went limp, and as I collapsed forward I thrust out a hand towards the floor to support myself.

"There's something I've been keeping from you…" Tsumaki said with an oddly hoarse voice while removing his dark glasses. "Seijiro, the one who left the Takabayashi residence seven years ago, is…*me*."

"Oh, young master…"

Tsumaki was speechless.

Before I knew it, we were gripping hands tightly. Tears fell from the young master's eyes, apparently nearsighted despite his young age.

"How I wanted to see you…"

I broke down crying at his knees. Sharp are the pangs of the desolation of one who possesses not even a single blood relative; from somewhere deep within me welled up an ineffable sadness.

The young master placed his hands on my back and sobbed quietly for some time, but eventually began speaking in fragmented

speech.

“I wish I could say…I was glad to see you…but ever since I…heard you were taken in by the Hayabayashi family…I was worried that…you might come here…”

I remembered my father’s final words—*If you try to play a hand drum, over time you’ll naturally desire a better instrument. And, in the end, you’ll surely be tempted by that drum*. It was only now that I was able to fully realize the great influence of this fate. But, at the same time, I got the feeling that the barrel of the so-called “Spirit Drum” lying at my knees was nothing more than a mere piece of wood, and later, when I thought about this, I would realize how truly strange it was.

Before long, the young master gently lifted me up off his knees and looked into my eyes again.

“I presume now you understand everything.”

“Yes…except for one thing…” I said, wiping my tears.

“Young master…why don’t you return this drum to the Hayabashi family?”

At this, an unspeakably painful expression appeared on his brow.

“You don’t understand…do you?”

“No, I don’t,” I answered honestly. The young master let out a small sigh.

“Well then, I will make sure that when you return here, all will be made clear. And I will ensure that you gain rightful possession of this hand drum.”

“Rightful…possession…”

“Yes. When that time comes, you must destroy this drum with your own two hands so that it never causes trouble again. Just as your ancestor had requested…”

“My own two hands…”

“That’s right. I’ve been ruined, mind and body. Because of this drum’s curse…I’ve grown thin and wasted away…and have even lost the power to destroy the drum.”

Tsumaki said this quietly as if speaking to himself, gazing outside at the darkening evening. “She should be returning any time now…Lady Tsuruhara, that is…“

I exited the gate of the Tsuruhara residence, head hung low.

Today was the first time I've been thrown into such a complete state of confusion. Never in my wildest dreams had I imagined such a family would exist. Everything seemed bizarre, like part of a dream, and yet it all felt more disturbing, frightening, joyful, and sorrowful than a dream.

First the young master, who abandoned his obligations, forsook his name, and even ate the candies from his own memorial service…and the widow of the Viscount Tsuruhara, who seemed to pretend he was a nephew, confine him to her house, and order him around like a maid…there was also that exquisite dressing room, that eerie sickroom, that leather whip, and The Spirit Drum—What an enigmatic world! What an absurd family! I was unable to believe what I saw with my own eyes.

As I was thinking this, I suddenly realized the bulge in my chest. Looking down, I saw pieces of the box that the young master had crumpled up sticking out of my pocket. I withdrew the bundle and raised my head, considering where to dispose of it. Just then I halted, having nearly bumped into a lady coming towards me whose gaze was directed at the ground.

She too stopped and raised her head.

The graceful-looking woman had a fair complexion, probably around 24 or 25. Her large head of hair was done up fashionably. Wearing a black-crested kimono with a white collar, there was a certain sophistication to her, like an actress in the theater. She held something in one hand, but at that time I didn't yet know what it was.

Then, for no particular reason, I bowed to her. The woman bowed gracefully in return, then continued past me. A sweet fragrance caressed my face and touched something deep inside of me.

When I walked forward, suppressing the nearly unbearable urge to turn around and look back, my forehead started sweating profusely. Once I finally reached Kogai Bridge, a rickshaw suddenly came down the hill on the left, and continued past me. Right then I glanced behind me.

A dark figure stood on the wooden bridge in front of the Tsuruhara residence, carrying something wrapped in purple cloth. A pale face turned towards me.

I quickly escaped, turning off the main road onto a side street.

***

Dear Mr. Kyuya Otomaru,

I would like to apologize for my actions the other day.

My heart and soul have been corrupted by the evil power of that drum, and as you can see I have been reduced to a powerless being as a result. But I think you believe there is still some part of me that is not yet fully corrupted. I share that same belief, hence my writing of this letter.

Would you be able to come to the Tsuruhara residence on the 26th at exactly five p.m.? If that time is not good for you, anytime after that is fine, so please let me know. But on second thought, it would be really best if you came at five.

I expect that the next time we meet, you will be able to gain possession of The Spirit Drum. Furthermore, at that time I think you will come to know a secret that you have heretofore been unaware of. It concerns a matter strongly connected to the Otomaru and Tsuruhara families for ages, and what I believe will be an extremely unexpected, even strange discovery to you.

Nevertheless, if you will excuse my rudeness, I have a request to make of you.

You may feel this to be an unusual request, but even so I would like to ask it.

There are exactly ten days left until the 26th, and before then I would like you to acquire a completely new set of clothes that you will wear upon your return. To the extent possible, I would like you to be clothed in respectable attire befitting a young master of renowned hand drum lineage. Of course, you must tell no one of my request. The reason will become evident immediately upon your arrival. I have enclosed a check for 1000 yen from Toyo Bank. Lady Tsuruhara’s name is listed, but this is actually a portion of my

savings. It is a very small amount, but I offer it as a token of thanks and congratulations for taking over in my place as successor. Finally, please continue to keep all details of our relationship secret, even once you return here.

On the evening of the 26th, it will be decided whether you can, or cannot put an end to the one hundred years of ill fortune brought about by The Spirit Drum. At the same time, it will also be determined whether I, having not taken a step outside this house for seven years, will be liberated at last. I eagerly await your hand of salvation.

March 17th

Seijiro Takabayashi

***

I tore the letter into tiny shreds and tossed it out the window of the automobile. We had just passed through Shiba Park and turned right at Akabane Bridge.

I watched my reflection on the glass before me, swaying with the movement of the vehicle.

Lined kimono with embroidered crest, hand-selected by a Mitsukoshi clerk; Hakata woven belt; hakama skirt of bright yellow; purple short coat; white tabi socks with felt sandals; stylish navy-blue wool cloak and matching colored fedora with a white ribbon—this absurdly effeminate outfit looked oddly good on me, giving the impression of an introverted student of the arts. Had it been any other time, I would have probably broken out laughing.

Placing my hands on cheeks haggard from worrying over these last few days, I brought my face close to the glass behind the driver. Despite having just cut my hair and shaved, I felt as if I had aged two years. Even the reddish tinge on my cheeks had disappeared completely.

When the automobile stopped at the Tsuruhara residence, the young master…or should I say Tsumaki, wearing the same white and indigo blue hakama from the other day but without his glasses, came out and bowed low to the floor. He extended his hands, ruddy probably from kitchen work, and took my bag of old clothes from the

driver and placed them quietly in the adjacent guest room. Then he took the wrapped box of Shiose candy from me, made an unnaturally dramatic bow, and led me into the house. Feeling like I was being swindled, a piece in some sort of game, I walked down the well-polished hallway.

The inner guest room, hot and stuffy, was filled with the scent of an aromatic tree. As the widow was not present I was somehow relieved and sat down at a convenient place.

At the time the appearance of the room seemed very different, but when I thought about it later I realized it hadn't actually changed much. Perhaps my initial impression was because the yellow lampshades hanging in the middle of the room had been removed and replaced by beautiful purple ones. The room had two fluffy blue-gray cushions and a cylindrical brazier made of gold-lacquered paulownia wood; in the alcove was a hanging scroll of a white peacock and a vase of white peonies, and behind me a round bronze electric heater that glowed bright red.

Tsumaki entered and poured the tea without even so much as a glance in my direction. I bowed stiffly to him. I felt like a criminal on trial awaiting the judge's arrival.

Unable to wait for Tsumaki to leave the room, I glanced towards the four hand drums displayed openly on the shelf, for I somehow felt that these were the instruments that would carry out my death penalty tonight. I went through the lines of an old Noh chant in my head to calm myself down: "In these four drums…of all the world…of all the world…is love…and hate…"

There was the sensation of the door behind me opening soundlessly and Lady Tsuruhara slipping into the room.

I made an effort not to be thrown into confusion like the other day, and slid gracefully into a chair.

"Oh…please have a seat…" she said with a pure, elegant voice and gave a shallow bow, then came to sit directly across for me, folding together her faintly pink fingers.

My determination collapsed in an instant. Unable to even look up, I stared down at the tatami mat, listening to my heartbeat quickening in a way it had never done before as the inexplicably charming scent from before overtook my entire body.

“It’s nice to meet you…Welcome to our house…I have heard so much about you…”

As I listened to the flow of her speech in a dream-like state my emotions gradually calmed down. “Please…make yourself at home…and also…” Right after hearing these words I was able to raise my head. It was then that I finally got a good look at Lady Tsuruhara.

Glossy black hair, done up in a traditional marumage style. Long and narrow well-formed eyelids. Cheeks with a hint of a curve. Skin from her round chin to the elegant back of her neck that was so white it seemed nearly transparent…Wearing a pale blue jacket over a kimono of the same color and a black belt, she looked exquisitely noble, like a soulless doll.

Struck by the considerable gap between what I now beheld and what I had been desiring for the last few days, I froze for a moment, dumbfounded. But why…I didn’t even know why I had come to see this woman.

Then she spoke in a soft voice, apparently a continuation from before.

“And so I scolded my nephew, asking him why he would send you home like that…You are an ancestor of the Otomaru family, and if you have asked to see that hand drum I cannot think of a better opportunity…”

I glanced at the woman’s face, remembering I wasn’t supposed to have seen the drum yet. But, struck by those long eyebrows and the elegance of those clear, dark eyes, I lowered my gaze again.

“…Why did he not show you the drum? Could there not be a more fortunate turn of events? During the many years we played these drums together, have I ever heard a gloomy, accursed tone come from that drum? I told him I would gladly hand over the drum to anyone who could produce the sound it is supposed to make…”

I was compelled to raise my head. This time, it was the widow herself who looked forlorn with eyes downcast.

“…And when I told him that, my nephew said he would send you a letter. He said he was going to ask me to bring the letter to you. When I told him how rude that would be, he said he was sure

you would come since you had not yet played that hand drum…what a fool he is…everything he says is so terribly impolite…”

The woman blushed and looked at me. I smiled awkwardly, feeling even my ears suddenly turn fiery red; for I thought that she was about to say she also knew about the bean-jam wafers…

“However, an idea occurred to me, so I had my nephew take up the pen and send you that letter…for which I am terribly…” she said, lowering her head.

“Think nothing of it…” I barely managed to say, hurriedly pulling a handkerchief from my sleeve and wiping my face. Just then, the light above me switched on, glowing a dazzling purple.

“Did you have need of anything…” Tsumaki said, sticking his head into the room. It seems she had rung the bell without me noticing.

“Are you done with your work?” The widow stared at Tsumaki, and for an instant I clearly saw in her eyes a hint of not indifference, but cruelty. My body suddenly tensed up, for I had glimpsed what some call the “power of beauty”; but it was also because I had seen the utterly miserable, emaciated form of Tsumaki, the young master, being controlled like a slave by this same power.

“Yes, ma'am. Everything is…” Tsumaki made a graceful, feminine bow.

“…well then, come inside. Please…close the door behind you….and also, bring those four hand drums over here…”

Heeding her command, Tsumaki moved like a shadow and arranged the four drums before the widow and I, after which he sat politely a short distance away.

The widow wordlessly looked across all four drums, at last focusing her attention on one of them—but as I watched, the color quickly drained from her cheeks, and even her lips seemed to turn pale.

Tsumaki and I held our breath, eyes open wide.

A subtle, but unspeakably horrific presence filled the room.

Just as I saw a faint shudder run through the widow’s shoulders, the next moment she was wiping her eyes with the silk handkerchief held in one hand.

I was taken aghast; Tsumaki blinked three or four times, seemingly surprised himself. After sobbing quietly for two or three minutes without anyone in the room moving, the widow's disheveled eyelashes and eyebrows appeared behind her handkerchief. Then she coughed once softly and spoke with a frail…yet dignified voice.

"I have long waited for this day. I beg you to sever the fate that ties me to this hand drum."

"The fate that ties you…" I mumbled under my breath.

"What does that…"

"If I were to speak only a few words about my past, you would understand."

"Your past…"

"Yes…but I will not so readily speak on this matter. I realize I am being overbearing, but this shameful secret is more important than my life itself. That's why, unless you can select The Spirit Drum from within these four drums and produce the proper sound as foretold by the legend…I'm terribly sorry, but I must request this of you…"

The widow's words were pregnant with a deep-rooted…though gentle power, which only a woman can possess. An anxious, deep silence fell upon us.

As if under the control of an unseen force, I bowed politely, slid off my cushion, and removed my coat. I then took hold of the hand drum before me with a gold-lacquered sakura motif, ignoring the gaze of the widow whose lips had begun to tremble in astonishment. Finally, I pulled the drum close to my body, bracing like a samurai facing an opponent with sword drawn.

As I touched my finger to the drum head of The Spirit Drum, the combination of a hint of a solemn spring evening together with a warmth that permeated the room produced a soft sensation, like the skin of a virgin. I focused my energies and exhaled onto the front and back drum heads, then slowly put the drum to my shoulder and began to play…using all my remaining heart and soul…

Initially there was a gloomy, muted sound—akin to the cry of an owl in a dark forest near a temple: no joy, no sadness, only a quiet, lonely *thuh….thuh… thuh….*

But as I played, the drum grew accustomed to my fingers, and the sound progressively became more serene. I lowered my gaze, held my breath, and listened earnestly for something hidden deep in the sound.

Somewhere deep inside of the *thuh* sound I could hear a lingering tone…

I felt the pores all over my body constrict.

Indeed, my ancestor Kuno Otomaru was an expert drum maker. But when creating this drum, he had not realized that there were more feelings embedded than he had ever imagined.

”Into this drum,” Kuno had said. “I will imbue only my feelings of heartbreak and of being a living corpse. Its tone will express only my utter emptiness. There will not be even the slightest hint of resentment…”

But Kuno had been mistaken.

Hidden within the desolate sound that Kuno had granted this drum, made to match his feelings exactly…inside the powerlessness, the darkness, was an echo of eternal resentment. The drum was filled with an unrelenting sadness of the likes that could never be extinguished by human power. Perhaps even Kuno himself had not realized this. The sorrow of a spirit descending to the lowest level of hell, struggling to become free, yet cannot…the voice of a soul wandering all corners of the countless hells, trying to surface, to no avail…If this is not the cursed voice of the heartbroken, what is it? If this is not the resonance of Kuno’s regret, what is it?

One day, one hundred years ago, Ayahime played this drum and heard this sound. She alone felt the curse buried very, very deep within Kuno’s heart—not visible to the eyes nor easily heard by the ears——infecting her own heart with an unspeakably intense resentment. She must surely have been reminded over and over that death was the only escape from this curse.

…And now, one hundred years later…

…A cold sweat broke out on my forehead. My body lost all sensation of the warmth of the room. A chill ran down my back as the strength drained from my arms and legs, and I nearly dropped the drum. My vision dimmed and I managed to place the drum feebly

on my lap. With my trembling hand I grasped my handkerchief and wiped the sweat on my forehead.

Tsumaki hastily helped me put on my coat. Lady Tsuruhara removed a small bottle of liquor from the cupboard and, with a trembling hand, handed me a glass. After having me gulp down a glassful of the fiery alcohol, she offered me another.

I gestured with my hand to decline as I exhaled a long breath that burned my throat.

“Are you feeling all right?” she said, examining my face. Tsumaki’s face also showed concern. I grinned, jiggling my shoulders as I tied the cord on my coat. All the while, I could feel the unfamiliar alcohol quickly entering my bloodstream…

“Oh my…you were really as white as snow…although the color has returned considerably now…" Lady Tsuruhara said, fear in her voice. Tsumaki breathed a sigh of relief.

“But oh dear…what a terribly unusual sound that was! And what amazing skill you possess…it made my hair stand on end!”

Voice trembling with emotion, Lady Tsuruhara stood up and put away the liquor bottle, then returned to her seat. But a moment later, as if remembering something, she glanced at me before withdrawing a step and bowing, both hands on the tatami mat.

“I very much appreciate what you have done. Thanks to you, I’ve been able to hear the *true* sound of this drum for the very first time. Great sir, there is no doubt you have been blessed with the lineage of a master. After hearing this, I can no longer keep my secret from you. In truth, it is *I* who is…"

She paused, burying her head even deeper into her hands.

“It is *I* who is…the bearer of…the Imaoji lineage.”

I gasped and turned around to look at Tsumaki. But, showing no sign of whether he knew or not, he only stared motionlessly at the widow’s bundle of glossy, youthful hair. The widow continued, her head still buried in her hands.

“Telling you all of this is terribly embarrassing, but after the Meiji Restoration my family was brought to ruin, and I, an only child, was about to be sold to a certain unseemly profession in Osaka, when the man who would become my husband rescued me. Needless to say, I knew that this drum was…”

She gradually lifted her head, shifting her gaze from the drum to Tsumaki and I. The widow continued, countenance dark and voice to match.

“…although I’ve known since long ago that the drum was in this house, I never imagined that…cursed by this drum, I would lead such a lonely existence…and end up with such a strange fate…"

“That’s enough,” I cut her off, unable to suppress my emotions.

“It all makes sense now. Now please raise your head. Basically, the three of us have been cursed by this drum. We’ve gathered together here because of this curse. But this fate ends today. If you will permit me to, I will smash this drum to pieces and expunge from this world our ancestor’s sin and curse. And so, let us enter a world of radiance, free from that dark legend!”

“Well, I would be delighted to,” said the widow, suddenly raising her tear-drenched face and grasping my hand, squeezing it tightly. That moment I felt the blood coursing through my entire body with a newfound intensity. She spoke again, hands gripping me with great force.

“My, what inspiring words those are! Those are the very words I have been waiting to hear. Now I would like to present you with a trifling gift to celebrate parting with this drum…”

“Oh…is that…” I tried to stand up. But the widow’s hands held me fast.

“No…you must not…"

“But there’s nothing wrong with…”

“No…if we don’t do this now, there will never be time later… Well then…Hey you, bring me that, quickly…” she said, turning back to look at Tsumaki.

Tsumaki burst out of the room as if he had been forcefully ejected.

Watching him leave, the widow finally released my hand and smiled.

I covered my face with my hands, feeling the alcohol from moments ago coursing through my veins.

My head hurts…I thought to myself as I closed my eyes and pulled down the pajama top over my head. The unfamiliar silk texture

was accompanied by a disturbingly pleasant fragrance that tickled my nose.

I was completely awake. But before standing up I racked my aching head to try and remember things. *What happened after that?*

A vision of a delicious meal appeared before my eyes. Composed completely of rare items, it was the pinnacle of extravagance. Bowls and a four-legged tray were adorned by paulownia crests.

Soon after, a vision of Lady Tsuruhara's cheerful face appeared.

"This is to celebrate our parting from The Spirit Drum," she said, and I remembered her unreasonable offer of a drink.

"Just one more drink…"

Bearing a smile of pearly white teeth, there was something alluring in the widow's eyes…But when I insisted I would not drink anymore, I suddenly remembered she had just given me a cold, delicious medicine to sober me up.

My memories after that point were completely gone. Except that, for some odd reason, the afterimage of the light's flickering carbon filament that I'd gazed at from the floor was etched clearly in my mind.

I had collapsed, drunk, and was now laying down somewhere in the Tsuruhara residence.

"Dammit." I opened my eyes and stuck my head through the neck of the pajama top.

This must be the widow's room from earlier. The only difference was the pink-colored covers over the lights. I listened carefully but all was quiet, without the slightest sound.

Suddenly I heard the high-pitched giggle of a woman close by. Surprised, I tried to get up, but two pale hands appeared and gently held me immobile. At the same time Lady Tsuruhara's red-tinged face peered down from above, bearing a wide grin. Gazing at me with sweetly seductive eyes, she spoke, breath smelling faintly of alcohol.

"Don't you try to get away, my darling. It's a little late for that… just surrender yourself and lay down for me," she said and broke into another fit of giggling.

Feeling a sharp pain like an ice pick digging into my body, I lowered my head back onto the pillow. I exhaled, unable to bear the terrible agony that made thought impossible.

There was a *clink*. The widow was apparently drinking something next to me on the bed, and let out a quiet belch. Then she began speaking in a soft voice.

“I’ve finally caught you,” she giggled again. “You are truly a lovely boy. I’ve totally fallen for you, darling.” The giggling continued.

I jumped up, forgetting all about my aching head. Looking down, I saw I was wearing nothing but my long kimono undergarment with an intricate flower pattern, drenched with sweat.

Wearing a disheveled, colorfully dyed undergarment, the widow sat next to the mattress with her legs folded out to one side. Before me was a large, silver tray containing two or three bottles of liquor that she drank with a fragile-looking glass. After realizing I was awake she cast me a seductive look with inebriated eyes and offered me an empty glass. I brushed it aside.

“Oh my…you can’t drink? What a coward,” she giggled. “But this just won’t do, darling. Because no matter how much you struggle, it’s simply inexcusable. Your only choice is to leave Tokyo with me, escape to somewhere far away and start a family…right now…this very moment.”

“Huh…”

The widow burst out laughing again, this time with increased intensity. I felt a dizzy spell coming on, and my head fell back onto the pillow.

“You know what?” Her laughter finally ceased. Apparently the widow was sitting next to me again. She continued with a calm, smooth voice.

“Mr. Otomaru. You must calm down and pay attention because our lives are on the line. Are you listening? You see…when I saw you around town I knew immediately that you were the one. After all, it was me who picked up the slip of paper you had dropped with the young master’s name written on it. Then I questioned Tsumaki and made him confess that he had tried to hide having candies with you. He also told me about your request. That’s why I made him write that

letter. But by that time I had already settled on my plans for tonight. Are you following me?”

“Plans for tonight…” I asked, suddenly sitting upright. But, struck by the widow’s burning beauty and fiery passion, I lost my nerve.

“My decision was easy. I had tired of Tsumaki. I had tired of that lifeless shadow of a man. I abhor men like that who are nothing but walking corpses…”

As she spoke, the widow poured a glassful from a golden brown bottle of alcohol and drank half of it down in a single gulp. Licking bright red lips, she continued.

“But you are an innocent, fresh boy. That’s why I fell in love with you. I’ve grown tired of that weak man who is always at my beck and call. Inspired by the sound of that drum, I grew bored of having that man as my plaything. I have been searching for someone who doesn’t only stare at my face, but tries to understand my feelings. That’s when I met you. I thought that seeing you on the way back from visiting my ex-husband’s grave was some sort of fate. My only future is spending my life sheltered by your pure love, darling.”

As she spoke, the widow raised both hands and adjusted her hair. I shrank back, like a spider caught by a human.

“That’s why for the last few days I have been selling all my possessions, getting as much cash as possible, and putting it in a leather bag in the closet. I will give it all to you—and I am even prepared for the possibility that I die tomorrow. That is how pure my feelings are for you…However, there is one thing I will leave behind: that so-called ‘Spirit Drum’…I’ll leave that as a toy for poor Tsumaki…he can embrace it, pretending it’s me, and go wherever he likes.”

I covered my face with my hands.

“It’s almost three o’clock. My driver should be here at four. Tsumaki went to bed after midnight so he shouldn’t wake up any time soon.”

Without removing my hands I shook my head forcefully back and forth.

“My, my…you haven’t made up your mind, have you?” the widow said, gradually losing control of her voice to anger.

“How impolite of you, Mr. Otomaru. I see you have not yet surrendered to me. You clearly don’t understand what type of woman I am…Well then…”

I sensed the widow immediately stand up. When I looked up in surprise, before my eyes was a terrible sight of the likes of which I had never seen before: the slovenly hem of her undergarment, the partially undone under-sash, the quivering whip of black leather…I froze like a rock, shocked, my hands covering my back.

Brushing the loose hair at her temple aside with a chalky hand, the widow bit her lip and looked down sternly at me. That earthly beauty…those awe-inspiring eyes, glowing with a mysterious passion…I gazed up at her face without blinking.

She spoke again, straining to get each word out.

“Now you listen *very* carefully, all right? My ex-husband did not accept my sincere feelings, so I tortured and killed him with this whip. The same goes for Tsumaki. Thanks to this whip, he became an obedient, lifeless man. So what of you? Are you not the grandchild of Kuno, who made The Spirit Drum, cursing and killing my ancestor Ayahime? As atonement for that sin, are you not bound to satisfy me? You must believe that coming here to see this drum was caused by the power of an irreversible fate. Am I right? Or do you disagree? Would you like to have this whip show you my true power…and your rightful punishment?”

My breathing began to quicken by degrees. Looking up at Lady Tsuruhara, now undoubtedly possessed by the spirit of Ayahime, I panted heavily…keenly feeling the horror of retribution for a sin committed by my ancestor a century ago.

“So are you with me…or not?” questioned the widow, biting her lip as if to chew it right off. A pale glow flickered across her face, like a will-o’-the-wisp. Held in her supple hand, the supple black whip undulated.

“Oh…it’s all my fault,” I said, once more covering my face with my hands.

The horse whip fell onto the tatami mat with a *thud*.

There was the sound of glass breaking, and a cold hand suddenly brushed aside my hands…the next moment, a passionate kiss struck me, eyes still closed, like a sudden rainstorm. The stink of

alcohol on her breath; the scent of a woman; the scent of facial powder; the scent of hair; the scent of perfume—it all assaulted me with an unfathomably deep sorrow.

“Forgive me…please…forgive me…” I contorted my body and tried to stand.

“My Lady…My Lady, My Lady!” came Tsumaki’s voice from the hallway. At the same time the flash of a flame flickered and disappeared, visible through the paper sliding door just as Lady Tsuruhara and I turned around to look.

“Fire…it’s a fire!” The sound of scuffling accompanied Tsumaki’s despairing voice.

Apparently back in her right mind the widow got up, crossed the bed, and quickly slid open the door. Standing in the midst of the darkness was Tsumaki, blocking her way in an informal cotton kimono, hair unkempt.

“Ah!” The widow cried out in surprise. Grasping the left side of her chest with both hands, body contorted, she staggered away to the bed, abruptly falling face-down as she doubled over in agony. I remained sitting, staring dumbly at Tsumaki standing frozen in the hallway and Lady Tsuruhara lying collapsed on the bed.

Tsumaki walked straight into the room, stopping next to where the widow lay. Wielding in one hand a narrow dagger glinting coldly in the light, he looked down at me with a smile.

“Did I surprise you? That certainly was a close call. You were nearly a victim of that foul woman’s perverted sexual inclinations. She killed the viscount and was planning to kill me, with you as her next target. Take a look at this.”

He exposed his left shoulder and directed a light at his gaunt backside. Painful-looking red and black welts were scattered from his ribs to his lower back.

“This was the price I paid,” he said calmly, covering up his shoulder again.

“Obsessed with this woman, I became corrupted to the point where I even took pleasure in this. Even so, she lost interest in me. That’s why she brought you here, intending to break my heart and take pleasure from that. Knowing full well that I was awake, she purposely flirted with you…but it wasn’t jealousy that drove me to kill

her—it was because I thought you didn't deserve this. I did it to save you."

"To save me?" I muttered, as if in the middle of a dream.

"Snap out of it. I'm your brother Kyuroku, who was sold to the Hayabashi family when you were only six." His pale face drew up close to mine, tears dripping down it. Two bony hands grabbed my shoulders and shook them tightly.

I looked carefully at his face. From the myopic eyes to the emaciated features, it was as if the face of my late father had suddenly appeared before me. Brother…young master…Tsumaki… These thoughts flowed through my mind as I stared, but I didn't particularly feel anything. It was merely like I was watching a motion picture.

My brother wiped his tears with his kimono and cast me a melancholic smile.

He chuckled. "When you think back on this day, you'd better not laugh, Kyuya…Today I have become a new man. I have finally woken from the curse of The Spirit Drum."

His face was already wet with fresh tears.

"Your car will be here soon, so take that back home to Kudan. When you go, take the bag from that closet over there. It contains this family's entire fortune, which that woman just handed over to you. Leave everything else to me. I'll make sure you don't take the blame. You should only tell the old master about this. And I ask that you mourn…both of our deaths…"

My brother lumbered down and sat cross-legged behind me. He sobbed quietly, wiping his face with the sleeves of his kimono. I stared dumbfoundedly at the leather whip and dagger that lay nearby.

Before long, the widow's body began to visibly tremble.

"Uh….Uhhhh…" came a soft, feeble voice, and the widow raised her head, looking across at us, face pallid and eyes bloodshot. I don't know why, but I slowly slipped out of the futon. Her whitish lips began to quiver.

"I…am…so…sorry…" she said with a clear voice, extending her hand towards the water pitcher nearby. Without thinking I grabbed it and slid it closer to her, but when I saw dark blood from her white

fingers staining the pitcher's silver handle I quickly withdrew my hand.

The widow took two or three gulps and pulled back her hand. The pitcher rolled off the mattress onto the floor, water spilling out.

The widow's head collapsed back onto the mattress.

"Sa…yo…na…ra…"

The widow's voice was barely audible, and from the look on her face I could tell her time was near.

Biting his lip, my brother gazed quietly at her face.

When my car reached Sakurada, I called to the driver, "Tokyo Station please." But I had no idea why I was going there…

"You're not going to Kudan?" the young driver asked. "No," I shook my head.

It was right around then that my strange, meaningless days began.

After arriving at Tokyo station, I bought a ticket to Kyoto, again for no reason. Pointlessly getting off at Kozu station, I pointlessly entered a hotel lounge in front of the station, ordered a drink that was too strong for me, gulped it down, then immediately reserved a room and went to sleep.

In the evening I woke up and finally got something to eat, after which I pointlessly got on a steam train going west. Then somebody, maybe it was a hotel maid, brought me a bag that I had no memory of, and after I got into an argument about how it wasn't mine I finally remembered my brother had given it to me in the car when I was leaving the Tsuruhara residence, so I took the bag. I also remembered that it was packed with stacks of bills, but I guess at that time I didn't particularly consider what I would do with them.

After the train started moving I realized that two pages from the Tokyo evening paper were on the floor. I picked them up, and as I was leafing through them a large headline caught my attention: "Viscount Tsuruhara's Widow Deceased".

***

Today at 10 a.m. the widow of the Viscount Tsuruhara (31), known for her beauty and lascivious tastes, died in a fire together with a young man in her residence in Azabu, Kogai city. But what on the surface appeared to be a double suicide was, in fact, a homicide. As proof of this, although a badly burned dagger was found near their bodies, a clasp from the dagger sheath was recovered in the corner of a hallway several meters away.

Not only had the widow had withdrawn her entire savings from Toyo Bank two or three days ago, but several days prior she had sold off all of her property, and the cash from the transactions was apparently destroyed in the fire.

The young man who had died with her in the fire was identified as a nephew who had been living with her, Toshiro Tsumaki (27). As there was apparently no maid or anyone else living in the house the details are not clear, although rumors have it that the two were romantically involved.

At present this unusual case is being investigated by the authorities to the best of their abilities.

***

Following this was a long list of the widow's wrongdoings. I yawned several times while reading the article and soon dozed off, my head against the window.

The next morning I got off in Kyoto and wandered around aimlessly. When I arrived in a quiet part of town, I stopped a random person on the street.

"Might this be where the remains of the Tsuruhara residence are located?" I asked.

The person gave me an awkward look and left without answering. I also tried asking here and there about the Imaoji and Otomaru families, but all my effort was for naught. I didn't have any plans to go to the Tsuruhara residence and do anything in particular; I simply felt a vague irritation.

When evening came I went out to a street in Gion, and as I gazed lovingly at the myriad beautiful lights throughout the area, a

great feeling of nostalgia came over me. I was standing there absent-mindedly, feeling as if I had returned to my hometown as a young child, when I noticed a pair of apprentice geishas walking toward me. The facial features of the one on the right looked identical to Lady Tsuruhara, so I couldn't help but grin and ask their names. The one on the right answered, "Michiyo", and the one on the left, "Gyokudai". When I questioned where they were from, Michiyo pointed at a corner across the street.

"Would I be able to speak with you somewhere in private?" I said, passing my business card to the girls.

They stared at the card for a few moments, then after nodding to one another with wide eyes they smiled and lead me inside a building with the name "Tsuruha" a little ways down the street. The girls left, but Michiyo returned shortly after, now wearing a kimono—causing me to feel like I was watching a miracle occur before my very eyes.

The serving girl there fawned excessively over me, calling me "Mr. Takabayashi" and "young master". Because this somehow disturbed me, I said my real name was Kyuya, whereupon she asked my last name. When I said "Otomaru" she laughed, holding her chest. I myself chuckled loudly, for the first time since leaving Tokyo.

After that, I sought out only women resembling Lady Tsuruhara: geishas, apprentice geishas, cafe hostesses, actresses…in the end, I was happy to find anyone who had even a similar nose, similar eyes, or similar figure. Next I headed to Osaka.

From Osaka I traveled far and wide to various well-known cities—Beppu, Hakata, Nagasaki—drinking and getting drunk, searching around for women. There were times when a woman's face looked identical to Lady Tsuruhara at night, but come morning lacked even the smallest resemblance. When that happened I broke out into tears, only to be laughed at by the woman.

When I wasn't drunk I was lounging around, reading novels or retellings of history. I wondered if there might be someone who had fallen in love the same way I had. I searched, curious to discover what they did, but alas, I couldn't find anyone like that.

Eventually two years passed, and in Dogo, Iyo City, I heard the fuss about a great earthquake in Tokyo. But after hearing that Kudan

wasn’t affected I gave up returning to Tokyo and went back to wandering around. But this time it didn’t last long. As my remaining funds diminished, so did my health. My lung catarrh, which had given me trouble for some time now, had finally gotten serious.

It was the beginning of the next spring when I passed through my beloved Hakone and made an infrequent visit to Odawara. As I waited there for the temperature to warm up, again my money ran low so I paid the inn bill and began to wander eastward. There the weather was wonderful, peach and camellia flowers blooming at the houses in each village, and skylarks often flying up from the rapeseed fields that I passed.

On the way I grew tired, so I sat beside a green wheat field upon a hill, only to find myself suddenly dizzy and coughing up blood. Gazing at the sun reflecting off my dried blood on the ground, I put my hand to my forehead and began to contemplate everything.

After being away from Tokyo for a full three years, I finally regained a proper state of mind. Checking my pockets, I had only two yen and a handful of small change. Laying in the grass beside the field I gazed up at the great blue sky, listening for a long, long time to the lovely *prriee-prreet prriee-prreet* call of the skylarks.

Returning to Tokyo, I sold off my clothes and, now looking like a member of the working class, got a room at a cheap inn at Yotsuya. But, unable to wait for the break of dawn, I took a train to Kudan.

Once I saw the old cypress gate in the distance, I pulled my hunting cap low over my eyes and sat down on a large rock in the street. Right then two students from Gyosei school came walking down the street. When they saw me they gave me a wide berth, whispering “what a young bum” as they passed by. Considering how I looked—with my pale, bearded face, and dust-caked sandals—their response wasn’t a surprise.

By the time the sky had begun to darken, I had only seen a single unfamiliar live-in student pass through the Takabayashi gate, and hadn’t heard a single drum tap.

Coughing terribly, I returned to the Yotsuya inn where I went to sleep. When morning came, I returned to the place near the Takabayashi gate and watched a few more people come and go, but

no one resembling the old master. That day the sounds of hand drums were quite lively, but I never heard his drum being played.

I came back the next day. The following day I returned again, and once more the day after that. But I didn't see any sign of the old master. My heart sank when I realized he might have passed away unbeknownst to me.

"But he might still be alive," I thought. "Before I die, I wish I could at least catch a glimpse of him from a distance…" Once the sun rose I found myself heading back towards Kudan. After spending time sitting upon it every day, I had grown a certain attachment to the discarded rock that laid a good distance from the Takabayashi gate.

"It's that beggar again…" said two women who looked like students, pointing at me as they entered the game. Later, when I happened to fall asleep, someone gently placed a hand on my shoulder. I rubbed my eyes, thinking it was a policeman, but to my great surprise it was the old master. I hastily knelt on the ground before him in respect.

"I thought it was you…It's good to see you…I've been waiting for you…Take this money, make yourself presentable, and come to my room at one a.m. tomorrow night. I'll open the shutter below the roof for you. And don't mention this to anyone."

As he spoke the older master handed over a bunch of silver coins wrapped in a handkerchief, then hurried back home. The coins still in my hands, I pressed my forehead into the dirt.

That night it was cloudy and warm.

Dressed like a gardener, I squatted in the backyard of the Takabayashi residence as I waited for the appointed time. Something like rain brushed by my cheek.

But…then I heard the sound of a hand drum coming from the old master's room above me. *Thuh, thuh, thuh…pa-thuh…thuh, thuh, thuh.*

I caught my breath in disbelief.

"Dammit. That drum survived the fire. My brother must have sent it to the old master. Or maybe the master accepted a package from my brother addressed to me…This is terrible," I thought, listening carefully.

The sound of the drum died away, then returned. As I listened to its quiet, beautiful tone, my chest began to rise and fall with increasing vigor.

Dark…dismal…forlorn…struck with a great passion, before I knew it the drum's sound had taken on a bright, cheerful timbre. It was like a soul, having sunk to the farthest depths of hell with a hatred of all things, now ascending ever so slowly back through this world, permitted by the grateful hand of Buddha to finally rest in peace.

As I listened, the sound took on a certain lightness, eventually becoming that of a completely normal drum—a wonderfully clear sound, like a dazzling blue sky on a perfect, cloudless day.

"Yahhh…*tah*…Hahhh…*thuh*…Hah…*thuh……thuh-thuh*," the old master chanted as he played the drum.

It was the rhythm of the ancient Noh song "Okina".

"To-totarari, tarariraaa…All the way to Tokorochiyooooooo…We too are samurai from long agoooooo…Old as a crane and a turtleeeeee…Believe in yourself and happy you will beeeeee…To-totarari, tarariraaa…"

Humming the song to myself, for the first time in many years I experienced a sublime joy as if my mind and body were fading away into nothingness.

After some time the sound suddenly stopped. Complete silence stretched on for the next five or six minutes.

I touched my hand to the shutter. It slid open soundlessly, so I took off my new rubber shoes, brushed the dust off my newly-bought socks, and silently climbed the memory-laden ladder to the rooftop. Supporting myself with one hand on the wooden floor, I slowly opened the sliding door.

I can hardly bear to write down what happened after that. But I'll at least try to describe the rough sequence of events.

I took down the old master's corpse from the lamp cord and laid him down on the bed.

Then I took down the memorial tablets of my parents and older brother from the altar in the corner of the room and placed them near the old master's pillow. I burned incense and prayed for their souls.

A little while later, I left the Takabayashi residence carrying the box of The Spirit Drum. I returned through the pouring rain to the Yotsuya inn.

Fortunately the rain had let up the next day, so everyone staying at the inn went out; only I stayed behind in bed, saying I wasn't feeling well. Once it seemed everyone had left, I got up and opened the box of the hand drum: besides the drum itself was a single note and a bunch of bills wrapped in white paper. There was no name nor signature on the note, but it was unquestionably the old master's handwriting.

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I'm giving you this money that I have been saving up. Take this drum, go somewhere far away, and live a good life. Find at least one or two people who show potential and leave them behind as your successor. I'm sure you already know how to dispel the vexed spirit within that drum.

I've grown to admire you and your brother's talents far too much. That's why I was able to send you to get that drum without concern. But as a result, I caused that terrible, irrecoverable tragedy. I'm going now to meet your parents and apologize.

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I cried so hard I felt my life would end right there. But when I thought about how I might not live long enough to repay my obligations to the old master, I ripped apart my futon, scratched up the tatami mat, and chewed the old master's note as I flailed wildly around my room.

However, my fate was not yet over.

Clutching the drum, that night I took a steam train from Tokyo to Ikaho.

I think it was the next day after I settled down in a hot spring resort when a Tokyo newspaper arrived with a long article about the Takabayashi family. At the beginning was a picture of my beloved old

master, and at the end a photograph of someone I had no memory of, but I was surprised to see “The Peculiar Pirate Kyuya Takabayashi, a.k.a. Kyuya Otomaru” written below it. The article went like this:

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Exactly three years ago, in the spring of 1922, the Tsuruhara widow died in an unusual accident. According to the subsequent investigation performed by the authorities, the person who murdered the widow and her nephew Tsumaki on the night before a trip, escaping with a large sum of money, was the burly young man previously known as Kyuya Otomaru, the successor of the Takabayashi family in Kudan.

However, perhaps after exhausting the stolen money, Kyuya suddenly snuck into the Takabayashi residence, strangling his former teacher, and escaped with a stash of money and a well-known hand drum.

For the last several days he had been posing as a beggar near the gate of the Takabayashi residence to observe the house. It appears that he committed this heinous crime after seeing his former teacher, Yakuro Takabayashi, withdrawing his entire savings for an unknown reason. Taking into account the case from three years ago, he is truly a clever, scrupulous, and efficient criminal of the highest caliber.

Furthermore, the Takabayashi family had previously suffered the disappearance of the next successor, Seijiro, so details about Kyuya were kept secret, but at the time of the heinous crime the memorial tablets of Kyuya’s brother-in-law Seijiro and his parents were boldly laid out beside the victim’s bed along with incense, an action which proves the connection with Kyuya…

***

When I read this, I realized that there was absolutely no way to escape these allegations against me. If I blamed the drum, who

would believe me? As I wrote this I have been reflecting on how strange a world we live in. And now I’ve finally finished.

I wish to immediately smash this drum to pieces and end my life. The resentment held by my ancestor Kuno Otomaru was recently put to rest thanks to the old master. This drum, now an empty shell of that resentment, and its bloodline will disappear from this world as of today. I have absolutely no regrets.

Yet when I think that I was born just to leave behind this brief tale of fate, it feels as if everything were a dream.

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Other Works

The below works were also translated and published by J. D. Wisgo:

1) Science: Hopes & Fears [Juza Unno: The Father of Japanese Science Fiction]
* Volume 1: Selected Stories
* Volume 2: Eighteen O'Clock Music Bath (a dystopian novella)

2) Tales of the Disturbed [by Yoshio Toyoshima] (dark and introspective stories from a contemporary and close friend of Osamu Dazai)

3) Classic Japanese Fairy Tales: Mimei Ogawa: The Father of Modern Japanese Fairy Tales
* Volume 1
* Volume 2
(Both volumes contain English versions as well as parallel English/Japanese versions of the stories)

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